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## Torture center demands probe of U.S. abuses

Anniversary prompts call for investigation

BY FELICIA MELLO  
Pioneer Press

For 20 years, the first treatment center in this country for torture victims has helped people persecuted by governments around the world.

But at its anniversary celebration on Sunday, the Minneapolis-based Center for Victims of Torture turned its attention to the U.S. government.

The center, which provides counseling and medical services to torture victims, denounced reported human rights abuses by U.S. soldiers and called for an independent commission to investigate the issue.

"The use of torture by our own government is a huge setback for human rights advocates and for the rule of law around the world," said Douglas Johnson, the center's executive director. Johnson cited the abuse of inmates at the Abu Ghraib prison in Iraq, as well as reports by other human rights groups that detainees have been tortured and killed in Guantanamo Bay, Cuba, and Afghanistan.

Several members of Congress have also demanded inquiries in recent weeks.

A spokesperson for the Department of Defense said the department has conducted at least 10 investigations of detention operations and that none showed systemic evidence of torture as a government policy.

Speaking to a group of volunteers, donors and clients on the lawn of the group's East River Road treatment center, Johnson said torture is not an effective interrogation technique.

"Truth does not come from breaking people," Johnson said. "Torture is a powerful tool to create rage and anger, but a very poor tool to generate useful information."

He urged attendees to sign petitions asking President Bush to adopt clear guidelines on humane treatment of detainees.

U.S. Rep. Betty McCollum, D-Minn., joined Johnson and said she plans to introduce a resolution asking the United Nations to investigate U.S.-run detention facilities.

"As the strongest democracy in the world, we must take our banner back on human rights," McCollum said.

At the ceremony, students from Walker West Music Academy drummed West African rhythms while members of the audience planted a tree on the center's grounds to symbolize their hope for a world without torture.

Since opening in 1985, the center has provided care to more than 1,000 torture survivors. At specially designed treatment facilities in Minneapolis and St. Paul, clients meet psychiatrists and social workers in sunlit rooms with rounded walls and ornate furniture. Staff members say the homelike atmosphere helps survivors relax and reinforces their self-worth.

In the 1980s and '90s, many clients came from Southeast Asia or Central America. Now the majority hail from Africa. Many suffer from post-traumatic stress disorder, a condition that places constant stress on their nervous systems, leaving them unable to sleep or concentrate, staff said.

The center estimates that 30,000 survivors of torture live in Minnesota.

Bayongson Nde, 58, is one of them.

A member of an independence movement in the West African territory of Ambazonia, Nde said he came to the United States in 2004 after being arrested and tortured by the government of the Republic of Cameroon, which controls the area.

When he arrived, he had fresh cuts on his arms and legs, and a scar on one of his eyes. His captors had bashed his head repeatedly into a wall, he said.

"I used to have echoes in my head, and I could not breathe well," he said.

A friend referred him to the center, where staff members saw how emaciated he was and immediately sent him to the hospital, Nde recalled. The center later helped him get food, transportation and counseling.

Being tortured "has lowered my human feeling," Nde said. "I feel subhuman."

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